

Bird-friendly Gardens

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Spring has sprung and many of us are thinking of preparing our gardens for warmer weather. While some of us garden because it's fun or because we want our living spaces to look beautiful, I'd like to add another important reason to the list: bird conservation! Gardening, if done right, can help native birds and other wildlife and even increase the number of feathered visitors to your yard.

Perhaps the most vital part of a bird-friendly garden is the native plants. Native plants are ones from this region, while non-native plants are ones from outside this region. Native plants provide several benefits for birds: more insects (yes, that's a good thing), more nesting material, shelter, and edible fruits seeds and nectar.

Birds require insects, and insects require native plants. The vast majority of terrestrial birds eat insects and the chicks tend to eat mostly insects when they first hatch. Insects, especially caterpillars, are rich in protein, nutrients, and hydration, so they're a very important part of a growing chick's diet. A nesting Chickadee, for example, needs between 350-750 caterpillars *per day* depending on their clutch size. So, if you have lots of bugs and caterpillars in your yard, you might be more likely to get some nesting birds as well.

How do you get more delicious caterpillars in your yard? Plant native plants! They host far more insects than non-native plants. For example, a non-native tree will host only a few species of caterpillars, while a native oak tree will host over 400. So, to help birds and other wildlife thrive, you can plant native trees, grasses, flowers, and shrubs.

Another important part of making your garden more bird-friendly is to limit your light pollution. Most migrating birds travel at night. The stars and setting/rising sun help many of them navigate in the dark, so the bright glow of a city or town can really disorient them, lead them off course, or cause them to crash into windows.

You can limit your light pollution by turning off lights, closing curtains at night, and minimizing your garden lights. Many people beautify their gardens with lighting along pathways, strung up in trees, shooting up from fountains, or spotlighting features. This extra lighting is usually entirely unnecessary, perhaps with the exception of lighting walkways. Turning off these extra lights, dimming them, putting them on timers, or angling them down at the ground can help save wildlife from light pollution.

Another way to make your garden bird-friendly is by adding a bird feeder and bird bath. Bird baths and other water features are extremely helpful to birds and other wildlife in our brutally hot summers. And birdfeeders are a great way to supplement the diets of our native birds. Here at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, we use a mixture of black oil sunflowers seeds and chicken scratch in our feeders. You can also add in some meal worms as a special treat!

Finally, you can help the birds in your garden by limiting the amount of toxins in their environment. Insecticides, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and any other toxins tend to make their way up the food chain. As previously established, insects are vital to birds, and any depletion of native insects will be a loss for native wildlife. And if a birds consumes an insect, snake, mouse, or other prey item that contains

poison, that bird can then be poisoned itself. To keep birds healthy, it's best to stick to nontoxic solutions like Diatomaceous Earth or homemade hot pepper spray.

I hope these tips will help you see more birds in your garden this spring. Happy gardening!

Photo: A Blue-gray Gnatcatcher enjoying an insect

By Mike Williams